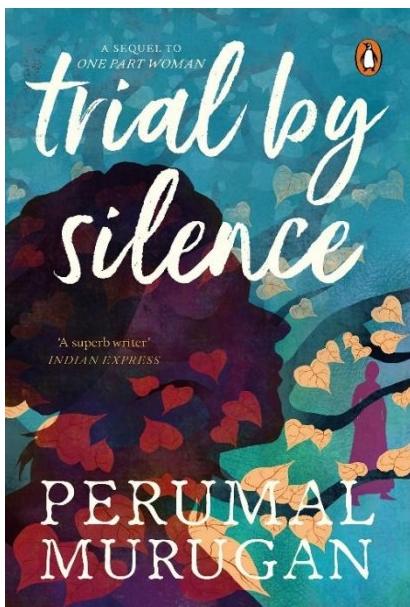




Trial by Silence and **A Lonely Harvest** by Perumal Murugan. Translated by Aniruddhan Vasudevan

Reviewed by *Rituparna Sengupta*



TRIAL BY SILENCE. By Perumal Murugan. Translated by Aniruddhan Vasudevan. Gurgaon: Penguin Random House, 2018; pp. 265, 350 INR, ISBN: 9780143428336

hails—who alleged that his book ‘insulted’ Gounder women and Hinduism. The novel, set in early twentieth century, narrates the story of Kaliyannan and Ponnayi, a loving married couple, and their struggle with the stigma of being ‘childless.’ The climax of the novel drives Ponna away from Kali and into the arms of a stranger, as she is ‘tricked into’ visiting a chariot festival and participating in the religi-

O, now, for ever
Farewell the tranquil mind! Farewell
content!
(*Othello*, Act 3 Scene 3)

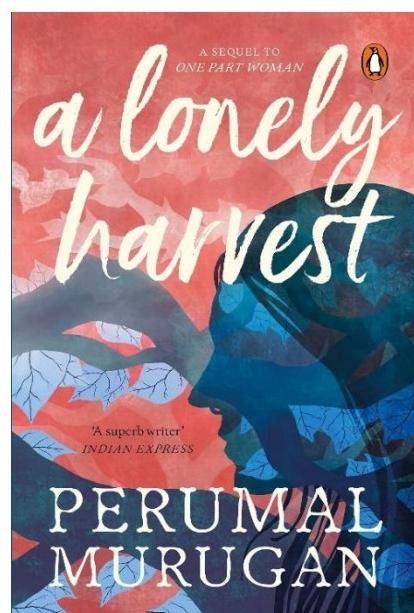
Tis in ourselves that we are thus or
thus. Our bodies are our gardens to
the which our wills are gardeners.
(*Othello*, Act 1 Scene 3)

In January 2015, Tamil writer, poet, and scholar, Perumal Murugan made a dramatic declaration on his Facebook page: “Author Perumal Murugan is dead. He is no God. Hence, he will not resurrect. Hereafter, only P Murugan, a teacher, will live.”¹ This was in response to the controversy around his book *Maadhorubaagan*, (2010; tr. *One Part Woman*, 2013) and the harassment he had to face at the hands of members of the influential Gounder caste community—from which he too

¹Lal, Amrit, Amitabh Sinha & Geeta Gupta, “Tamil author Perumal Murugan announces his ‘death’ on Facebook over lack of freedom of speech.” *Indian Express*, January 15, 2015, New Delhi. www.indianexpress.com/article/india/indiaothers/forced-to-withdraw-novel-tamil-author-announces-his-death/.

iously-sanctioned practice of seeking a sexual partner believed to be invested with divine attributes by the half-female deity Maadhorubaagan for that particular night for the purpose of procreation. Before the controversy, Murugan had already finished writing the two sequels to *Maadhorubaagan*. He wrote in his Foreword to the revised Tamil edition of the books (post-controversy) that when he had written the sequels, he had experienced “a great freedom of mind,” and that he celebrates them for emerging “...from the rarest of rare moments in life,” while also being anguished over the realisation that such freedom is no longer possible (in the current political climate of religious chauvinism).²

Readers had been bereft of closure when *Maadhorubaagan* ended with the suggestion that Kali, devastated by the news of Ponna’s ‘infidelity’ was contemplating suicide. The ending was especially unsettling, given how intimately the author had drawn readers into the world of Kali and Ponna’s tender, playful love and consuming desire for each other, which gathers urgency as their idyllic romance is disrupted by societal pressure. It is to Murugan’s credit that even though the reader had been enthralled by the blissful union of Kali and Ponna and though this turn of events seems tragic, the mood evoked at this turning point is far from sentimental and is instead layered with nuanced, dark facets of sexual desire and possessiveness. The engaged curiosity of readers about the novel’s ending, compelled the author to return to the story for not one, but two sequels moving along different trajectories—one in which Kali succeeds in his suicide attempt (*Aalavayan* 2014; tr. *A Lonely Harvest* 2018) and another in which he fails (*Ardhanaari* 2014; tr. *Trial by Silence* 2018).



A LONELY HARVEST by Perumal Murugan. Translated by Aniruddhan Vasudevan. Penguin Random House India, 2018; pp. 264. ₹399. ISBN: 9780143428343

²Murugan ended his literary exile in 2017 with the publication of his book *Poonachi: Or the Story of a Black Goat*. He adopts particular literary strategies therein to defy and circumvent censorship: www.helterskelter.in/2018/06/book-review-poonachi-perumal-murugan/.

At one obvious level of interpretation, both novels are quite distinct. *Trial by Silence* traces the tortured psyche of Kali as he withdraws from Ponna (and others he considers ‘co-conspirators’) into an eloquent punishing silence, and thwarts attempts at reconciliation. A *Lonely Harvest* on the other hand traces Ponna’s journey through different stages of grief, desperately trying to keep Kali captive in her memories. If the former is about a man unable to overcome his sense of betrayal and self-pity, the latter is an enquiry into female resilience and solidarity, even if it stems from resignation. Both novels end with swift surprises, taking the story forward in two different directions.

Kali’s death in *A Lonely Harvest* is geared towards discovering “...how Ponna’s world might expand or shrink as a consequence of this” and towards this end the author humbly admits to have “...taken the freedom to wander around inside the world of women” (Preface, revised Tamil edition, translated in English). Women occupy the centre stage here, coming to each other’s support socially and emotionally, negotiating a world skewered against them. It is with her mother-in-law Seerayi’s and mother Vallayi’s help that Ponna learns to sow and reap a full, if lonely, harvest. The older women close ranks around the vulnerable Ponna who is distracted with grief. They shield and watch over her; not for once blaming her, but Kali instead, for his rashness and inconsiderate pride which ruins her life. The Seerayi who empathises with her widowed daughter-in-law here is different from the embittered mother-in-law in *Maadhorubaagan*. As Ponna nurtures her farm, reliving the loving care of her relationship with Kali, and rewarded by its fecundity, she likewise cultivates her own self. In *Trial by Silence*, we meet Ponna who is aghast at having unwittingly betrayed her lover, but has too much self-respect to cling to a man who called her a ‘whore.’ Though the motif of the disowned wife and abandoned child is at least as old as Kalidasa’s *Abhijñānaśākuntalam*, Murugan’s take on the motif presents a story of durable resilience and self-discovery.

Despite moving along different paths, both books have significant impulses in common and are ultimately companion pieces in meaningful ways. Both concern themselves with betrayals and lost loves, coloured with the subtle emotion of *abhimaan*.³ Both stem from Kali’s resolve to punish Ponna and her bewildered grief, raising questions of gendered power equations in the most ideal male-female

³Word of Sanskrit origin; the approximate meaning being ‘egotistical and resentful hurt felt towards a loved one’ (my translation).

bonds of love. Both lovers have been to the festival at different times—he, freely and unthinkingly as a youth awakening to his sexuality, and she, for procreative purposes, resorting to psychological projections of Kali’s image onto her lover for the night—but the consequences for both are expectedly different. In the course of both the novels we learn that sexual fidelity, mostly taken for granted, is not an unchanging constant but a convention erected and breached for human convenience. The *ardhanārīshwar*⁴ ideal inspiring the festival, also embodied in Ponna-Kali, is by no means suggestive of absolute equality and untrammelled harmony. Both the books raise important inter-linked questions: Is it the thought of Ponna’s betrayal or the possibility of the confirmation of his own impotence that Kali is unable to face? Is Kali pushed to his death/muteness by others or is his tragedy self-inflicted, born of his egotistic shortsightedness? Is social custom to be seen as a merciful outlet for individual needs, or a perverse tool for quenching the very needs it itself stokes?

The sequels continue the descriptions of the sensuous and erotic union of Kali-Ponna, infusing them with various elemental aspects of nature. For both, everything around seems to be suffused with memories of their love. In *Harvest*, Kali metamorphoses into the field, the breeze, the rocks and the harvest for Ponna, as she charts the universal journey of keeping a loved one hostage in one’s memories, to slowly learning to set them free. Kali’s desire for Ponna despite his hurt pride, and his masochistic summoning of the visage of his imagined rival, hearken back to the famed Shakespearean tale of jealousy and suspicion born of desire, except that here Othello carries his Iago within himself.

The character of Uncle Nallayyan is the novels’ North Star, predictably appearing in both the texts with different and yet concerted intent. Free and uninhibited, self-aware, and worldly wise, he brings perspective of life beyond the individual experience and the world beyond the village to Kali in one case and Ponna in the other. Uncompromisingly frank and unsentimental, weaving tales of sexual ‘aberrations’ into bawdy humour, he exposes the hypocrisy of sexual mores for men and women, and shows a rare sympathy for female desire and the concomitant recognition of male privilege. Through his and Seerayi’s recollections of family and village histories, the readers

⁴Editor’s Note: *Ardhanārīshwar* in Hindu mythology is ‘the lord who is half female’ (Source: *Encyclopedia of Hinduism*, edited by Dennis Cush, Catherine Robinson, and Michael York. Routledge, 2008, pg. 40). Its androgynous form, combining the characteristics of Shiva and his female energy, parvati, is symbolic of the dissolution of the boundaries between the male and the female, and suggestive of their fusion.

catch glimpses of a social order where husbands invited men to have intercourse with their wives, for pleasure or progeny. There is also a description put forth by the farm help, Vengayi, of a freer life for widows in her own community. All these episodes serve to establish the contingency of moral values—across time, caste, and propertied classes.

The tension between the corporeal and the spiritual that is carried forth in the sequels move towards a resolution, as the limits of individual experience, especially self-pity, are gradually laid to rest against the backdrop of collective human wisdom and compassion. If *Maadhorubaagan* showed us a world in which the individual is deeply embedded within the social and constrained by it, then its sequels portray how the social is likewise deeply invested in the individual. If it is the well-intentioned meddling of the family that caused the rift between the lovers, then its repercussions are also keenly felt by both the closely-knit families, who have their own guilt to negotiate with.

Even readers unfamiliar with the original Tamil version will be able to appreciate Aniruddhan Vasudevan's adept translation which successfully carries over the spirit and flavour of the original text into its English translation. This is most visible when it comes to portions of the text that dissolve the distinction between the human and the natural world. *A Lonely Harvest*, for instance, carries the following lines:

With a quiet, steady smile, Kali flowed into the bed. Flattening down the soil that had been raked and piled, he slowly filled up the brinjal bed. He stood over the roots and sank into them. Ponna could not even hear Muthu shouting to ask if the bed had been fully watered. All that filled her eyes was the sight of Kali filling up the channel so completely that it looked like the banks would submerge. (p. 63)

Though carefully shorn of *Maadhorubaagan*'s recognisable geographical and religious references, and accompanied by emphatic disclaimers about their own fictionality, the sequels are by no means apolitical. Together, they respond to the political forces founded on notions of obsession with racial purity and religious authoritarianism, which had sought to censor and silence their precursor. As Nallayyan gently reminds us, for each narrative, there are as many counter narratives—norms contain within themselves their own counters, however

discomfiting. In times when the ancient practice of *niyoga*⁵ is explained away as a medical marvel, the assertion that such a practice essentially stemmed from ‘legitimate’ extra-marital sexual intercourse is nothing short of radical, and a reclamation of human dignity as well as imperfection in the struggle for survival. The novel alludes to a culture in transition, influenced by the ‘white man’ and his (Victorian) morality into adopting fastidious approaches to sexuality and reproductive ethics. This is as true of Kali as of the modern reader for whom the festival and its custom sound so scandalously licentious as to make him vehemently disavow its very existence. Even as the present historical moment prompts us to question the links between the illusion of free will and the oppressiveness of simultaneous realities, Murugan’s unique universe re-centres the human into the life-affirming ambit of choice, and foregrounds the strength of the human spirit to bear its consequences.



⁵The ancient Hindu practice that sanctioned a woman, who was a widow or whose husband was unable to father a child, to approach another man, under strictly-observed conditions, to help her bear a child.